

The Birds of Inya Lake, Rangoon, Burma¹

BY

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(With a map)

There has been little in the way of serious bird study in Burma during the last decade, and so far as I could ascertain no published work on the birds of Rangoon since H. H. Harington's contribution, "Some Rangoon Birds" *J. Bombay nat. Hist. Soc.*, **19** in 1909. Believing that future ornithologists in Burma might be interested in noting any change in the pattern of bird species in a representative area of Burma's capital, my son Mark and I undertook for three years a survey of the birds on and about Inya Lake.

One of Rangoon's most attractive landmarks, this lake measures about 2 by 1.5 miles, has a shoreline of probably 10 miles, and a water area of perhaps 2 square miles. Built as a reservoir for Rangoon in the 1880's, the lake shore is bordered by jungle, park land, Burma's biggest hotel, and some of Burma's finest residences (including the temporary Statehouse of General Ne Win).

I was fortunate to live in one of the houses bordering the lake, and to have access to its waters by canoe and sail boat. All its many bays and coves were visited at one time or another, but considerations of distance restricted the most thorough coverage to shore areas within half a mile of my home. Over the three years July 1968 to July 1971, we averaged one bird outing every three weeks.

Though we can only claim to have identified 82 species, we believe that given time and patience the lake area and its environs might have revealed a population of between 100 to 125 species. These figures may, however, never be attained because Rangoon's suburbs creep ever outwards, the parkland and waters of the lake are becoming more crowded with visitors, and the jungle areas are being ravaged by illicit woodcutters and by guard houses covering the approaches to the Statehouse. Fortunately, hunting and motorboats are not allowed on the lake.

Perhaps the most interesting feature of the area's bird population has been its migratory character. Probably less than one quarter of

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the species are truly resident, the remaining being seasonal visitors. There are roughly three bird seasons: the dreary, wet monsoon period (June to September) when the number of species drops to its yearly low; the fall season (October to January) when the lake is visited by many migratory species from the north; and the hot, dry season (February to May) when birds from the parched countryside visit the lake. Some migratory birds from the north not seen in the fall also visit the lake during this last season.

In terms of sheer abundance, the House Crow and Common Myna clearly lead the field. Rangoon is notorious for its crows, and several thousand roost at night in high trees around the lake. Next to these two species, probably the most common are the Tree Sparrow, Indian Pond Heron, Lesser Whistling Teal, Black Drongo, and Little Cormorant.

The survey unearthed few distributional tidbits for science. The only possible contributions are two additions to the distribution of birds in the plains area of lower Burma, as given in the chart in Smythies' *THE BIRDS OF BURMA* (1953). These are: the Chestnut-headed Bee-eater; and the Daurian Starling. The former is a regular annual winter visitor to the lake. Its omission from Smythies' chart may have been inadvertent since he mentions its being encountered at Hlawga Lake which is just outside the city. A flock of Daurian Starlings was seen once by me on one of the jungle islands in the lake, and it may be an occasional visitor. According to Smythies, the Daurian was a rarity in the plains, having been sighted only once, in Pegu, a city 55 miles from Rangoon.

Three somewhat puzzling omissions from my bird list should be mentioned: the Redvented Bulbul (*Pycnonotus cafer*); the Paddyfield Pipit (*Anthus novaeseelandiae*); and the Brownheaded Gull (*Larus brunnicephalus*). The first two are common on the outskirts of Rangoon, while the Gull is abundant during the winter months on the Rangoon river. We never found them about Inya Lake.

Podiceps ruficollis Little Grebe

Common seasonal visitor. Usually encountered only in the easternmost arm of the lake where it is abundant from January to May. As many as 100 were seen at one time. Often seen in association with Lesser Whistling Teals which rest in the same inlet. Disappears during the monsoon.

Phalacrocorax niger Little Cormorant

One of the commonest birds on the lake from September to May. Disappears during the monsoon months. Usually seen singly or in small, loose groups but flocks of 40 or so have been counted swimming together in November. Rests at night in flocks of about 20 in

small lakeside trees, often in company with Darters.

Anhinga rufa melanogaster Darter or Snake-bird

Common on the lake during the dry season, September to May. Usually seen singly. Roosts at night with Little Cormorants. Disappears during the monsoon. Can be approached to within about twenty yards. Exciting bird to watch at all times.

Ardea cinerea Grey Heron

Occasional visitor. Encountered only three times, twice in January and once in May. Once it was perched on a lakeside tree; the other two times it was standing in shallow water adjacent to small grass-covered islands.

Butorides striatus Little Green Heron

Probably occasional visitor. Seen only once in March 1969, when a flock of three were seen perched on low branches overhanging the lake on a jungle-fringed narrows.

Ardeola grayii Indian Pond Heron

Probably a resident. One of the most common birds on the lake-shore, from October to May. Uncommon during the monsoon.

Bubulcus ibis Cattle Egret

Seasonally common, from January to May. During this period, a flock of as many as 20 can be seen feeding on the spacious lake-side lawn of the American Ambassador's residence.

Egretta alba Greater Egret

Common only in the driest months, March to May. Occasionally seen during the monsoon.

Egretta intermedia Intermediate Egret

Occasional visitor. Is the least common of the Egrets.

Egretta garzetta Little Egret

Very common during the driest months, March to May. Not often seen at other times. The evening flights of these to their roosts is always a lovely sight.

Nycticorax nycticorax Night Heron

Probably a resident. A small flock of about 20 birds lives on two tiny jungle-covered islands in the lake. Most commonly seen from September to December.

Ixobrychus cinnamomeus Cinnamon Bittern

Probably a resident. Common from March to May in reed and water hyacinth-fringed inlets. Usually seen only in the very early morning. Much less frequently at dusk.

Ixobrychus sinensis Yellow Bittern

May be resident. Single birds regularly encountered from March to May in late afternoons in rush and water hyacinth shore areas and islands.

Dupetor flavicollis Black Bittern

Uncommon. Encountered only in October and November in early morning and at dusk on edge of jungle islands.

Botaurus stellaris Bittern

Uncommon visitor. Encountered only once, in April, when two were flushed from reedy islands in the lake.

Dendrocygna javanica Lesser Whistling Teal

Very common from January to May. Always in flocks which number up to 300 birds. Always very wary and difficult to approach. At dusk and early evening, commonly heard flying and calling over the lake.

Nettapus coromandelianus Cotton Teal

Common from March till May where water plants are abundant. Seems to be increasing annually. Often seen in loose flocks of up to 20 birds.

Elanus caeruleus Blackwinged Kite

Probably an occasional visitor. Seen once in February.

Milvus migrans Pariah Kite

Very common from October to May but most abundant from November to December. Roosts at night in trees on some of the jungle islands. Disappears during the monsoon.

Milvus (migrans) lineatus Blackeared Kite

Appears also to be common but not easily distinguishable from above species. Same habits and habitat.

Accipiter badius Shikra Goshawk

Uncommon. Seen in September and October in garden trees along the lake shores, often being harassed by crows.

Gyps bengalensis Whitebacked Vulture

Uncommon. Single birds seen on two occasions in winter months resting in tall lakeside trees and being pestered by crows.

Pandion haliaetus Osprey

Uncommon from October to April. Seen flying over lake or resting on some lakeside tree.

Amaurornis phoenicurus Whitebreasted Waterhen

Common. Often seen from November to June along lakeshore.

Gallicrex cinerea Watercock

Common. Single birds can be seen at dawn or dusk in marshy inlets from March to May.

Gallinula chloropus Moorhen

Uncommon visitor. Single birds seen in April in reedy, shallow portions of the lake.

Hydrophasianus chirurgus Pheasant-tailed Jacana

Common from January to May. Sometimes seen with next species. Seems to be increasing in population on the lake. In breeding plumage with its long tail, it is particularly attractive. Always lovely in flight with its pied wings.

Metopidius indicus Bronzewinged Jacana

Very common from January to June in every marshy inlet. Less shy and more abundant than above species. It also seems to be growing in population.

Charadrius dubius Little Ringed Plover

Uncommon visitor. Seen only in March and April at the height of the hot, dry season when mud-flats sometimes appear in the lake. Singles and pairs seen.

Tringa glareola Wood Sandpiper

Seasonal visitor in April and May at the height of the dry season, when it is not uncommon on mud-flats on the lake.

Tringa hypoleucos Common Sandpiper

Commonly encountered from September to April. Usually seen singly along the shores of the lake and around tiny islands.

Chlidonias hybrida Whiskered Tern

Regular visitor from December to April. Usually seen in pairs or threes quartering the lake. Never seen at rest.

Gelochelidon nilotica Gullbilled Tern

Regular seasonal visitor from February to April. Seen singly and in threes, always in flight over the lake.

Streptopelia chinensis Spotted Dove

Resident. Common garden bird in the villas surrounding the lake.

Cuculus canorus Cuckoo

Occasional. Seen in October and December.

Cacomantis merulinus Plaintive Cuckoo

Possibly a resident. Common from January to July, particularly from March to May when its distinctive call is frequently heard.

Eudynamys scolopacea Koel

Possibly a resident but commonly heard only from October to April, particularly on small jungle-covered islands. Hard to spot. Usually keeps to thick canopy of tall trees.

Centropus sinensis Greater Coucal

Probably a resident on the jungle-covered islands where it has been encountered throughout the year.

Tyto alba Barn Owl

Occasional. Its screech is heard from time to time in lakeside gardens in winter months.

Strix seloputo Spotted Wood Owl

Occasional. Heard and seen while flying over a lakeside garden in March.

Cypsiurus parvus Palm Swift

Resident. Groups flying are a common sight year round along the lakeshore.

Ceryle rudis Lesser Pied Kingfisher

Occasional visitor. Encountered only in April and May. Spectacular diver.

Alcedo atthis Common Kingfisher

Seasonally common, from September to March, along the lake shore.

Halcyon smyrnensis Whitebreasted Kingfisher

Often encountered from August to April. Most common kingfisher on the lake. Noisy. Usually seen perched on some branch overhanging the lake.

Halcyon pileata Blackcapped Kingfisher

Uncommon visitor. Only seen once, in October, perched on a lakeside tree.

Merops leschenaulti Chestnutheaded Bee-eater

Uncommon but regular visitor. Small flocks of 3 to 6 birds seen from October to February on two jungle islands.

Merops philippinus Bluetailed Bee-eater

Uncommon but regular annual visitor. Small flocks occasionally encountered from September to April, hawking from lakeside trees.

Merops orientalis Green Bee-eater

Common, perhaps a resident. Seen all year round, usually found perched in small flocks on lakeside trees.

Coracias benghalensis Burmese Roller

Common, from September to May in lakeside gardens.

Upupa epops Hoopoe

Occasionally encountered in October and November in lakeside gardens.

Megalaima haemacephala Crimsonbreasted Barbet

Resident. One of the most common garden birds, more often heard than seen.

Hirundo rustica European House Swallow

Common from September to May, particularly from January to April. Singles and groups often seen flying over the surface of the lake hawking for insects.

Lanius cristatus Brown Shrike

Common garden bird from October to April.

Oriolus tenuirostris Slender-billed Oriole

Annual visitor but uncommon. Small flocks occasionally encountered from October to April in canopy of lakeside trees.

Dicrurus adsimilis Black Drongo

Very common, from September to April. One of the most familiar garden birds. Disappears during the monsoon months.

Dicrurus leucophaeus Ashy Drongo

Uncommon. Singles seen occasionally on jungle islands from October to February.

Artamus fuscus Ashy Swallow-Shrike

Uncommon. Seen only in July and August perched on high, exposed limbs of trees in lakeside gardens.

Sturnus malabaricus Ashy-headed Starling

Common in flocks of 20-30 birds from mid-November to mid-February.

Sturnus sturninus Daurian Starling

Occasional visitor. A flock of about ten birds encountered once, in mid-April, in trees in open section of a jungle island.

Sturnus contra Pied Starling

Commonly encountered in April-May and again in September along the lakeshore. Usually found close to water's edge.

Sturnus tristis Common Myna

Resident and abundant. Shares with the House Crow the distinction of being one of the two most common birds in the lake area. Almost always seen in pairs.

Sturnus javanicus Jungle Myna

Commonly encountered from March through June in meadow parkland fringing the lake. Rarely met in gardens.

Corvus splendens House Crow

Abundant and a conspicuous, noisy bird at all seasons. Every garden has them and at night they roost in thousands in high trees in certain areas fringing the lake.

Tephrodornis pondicerianus Common Wood Shrike

Occasional visitor. Encountered only once on top of lakeside tree in September.

Aegithina tiphia Common Iora

Uncommon visitor. Encountered only in March and April in lakeside gardens in trees and big shrubs.

Pycnonotus melanicterus Black-crested Yellow Bulbul

Common in small flocks in November and December on jungle islands.

Pycnonotus blanfordi Blanford's Olive Bulbul

Common in small flocks from March to May in garden trees and on jungle islands.

Muscicapa parva Red-breasted Flycatcher

Very common in garden trees and shrubs from October to February. All disappear by April. Except in late March, the bird is always seen in its drab brownish-grey winter plumage.

Phylloscopus inornatus Yellow-browed Willow Warbler

Uncommon. Pair encountered only once in November on jungle island.

Phylloscopus inornatus Yellow-browed Willow Warbler

Uncommon. Seen only once, a pair, in October, in canopy of garden tree.

Orthotomus sutorius Common Tailorbird

Common resident in lakeside gardens and on the more open jungle islands. More often heard than seen.

Copsychus saularis Magpie Robin

Common resident in lakeside gardens and in open parkland fringing the lake.

Monticola solitarius Blue Rock Thrush

Uncommon visitor. Encountered only in March in lakeside gardens.

Motacilla alba Pied Wagtail

Common from October to January. Never seen at other times. Visits lawns of lakeshore gardens.

Motacilla caspica Grey Wagtail

Least common of the three Wagtails. Singles seen occasionally from September to November on lawns.

Motacilla flava Yellow Wagtail

Most common of the Wagtails and often encountered from October to May, on lakeshore lawns. Is most common from February to March.

Prionochilus thoracicus Scarlet-breasted Flowerpecker

Uncommon. Pairs encountered only in April on jungle islands.

Passer montanus Tree Sparrow

Resident and very common around every lakeside home.

Ploceus philippinus Baya Weaverbird

Common from March to June, especially on rushes along the lakeshore. Nesting area was not found.

Lonchura punctulata Spotted Munia

Common from March to May in groups of as many as 20 birds in lakeside gardens. Occasionally seen during the monsoon months through to October when it disappears.

Lonchura malacca Chestnut Munia

Less common than above species, and never seen in large groups. Two to three birds is usual. Encountered from March to August, but most commonly during April to June when it nests in shrubs around lakeshore houses.

Emberiza aureola Yellow-breasted Bunting

Uncommon visitor. Encountered only in April along lakeshore: once a pair was seen in a small tree overhanging the lake on a jungle island; and a single was met a year later perched on a marsh plant in an inlet.